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ABSTRACT

This report from the Study of Personnel Needs in Special Education (SPeNSE) focuses on working conditions that affect special education teachers and how teachers acquire needed professional skills. The report found: (1) 80% of special education teachers serve students with two or more primary disabilities; (2) almost one-fourth of students served are from a cultural or linguistic group different from their teachers; (3) special education teachers serve fewer students (13 in PreK-6th grade and 25 in 7th-12th) than general educators; (4) the typical special education teacher works 53 hours per week and the typical general educator works 55 hours per week; (5) most general and special education teachers find their workload manageable, however, special education teachers tend to find their workload less manageable; (6) school climate is related to special education teachers' workload manageability and intent to stay; (7) special education teachers who rated their preservice preparation as very good or exceptional considered themselves more successful and said their workload was more manageable; (8) special education teachers who judged the quality of their preservice preparation as very good or exceptional completed more weeks of student teaching; and (9) special education and general educators devoted considerable time to continuing professional development, averaging 59 and 65 hours in 1999-2000. (CR)

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ED 467 268

SPeNSE Summary Sheet

Study of Personnel Needs in Special Education

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A High-Quality Teacher for Every Classroom

Report after report has confirmed that teachers are key to student achievement (Sanders & Rivers, 1996; Ferguson, 1991; Goldhaber & Brewer, 1996; Goldhaber & Brewer, 2000)[1]. Every student, including students with disabilities, deserves an experienced, well-prepared teacher. In the interest of providing a high-quality education for students with disabilities, the Study of Personnel Needs in Special Education (SPeNSE) asked the questions "Are teachers adequately prepared for their professional roles?" "What factors affect their sense of preparedness?" This report focuses on working conditions that affect teachers and how teachers acquire the professional skills needed in their work.

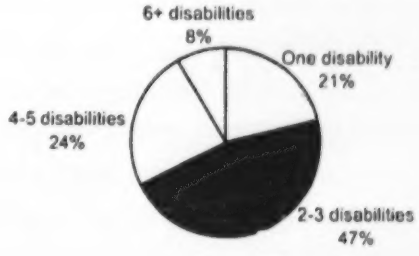
> The typical special education teacher is a 43-year-old female with 13.1 years of teaching experience. She has a Master's degree and is employed full-time by a local school district, earning $38,774 a year. She did not relocate to accept her position.

Working Conditions Affect Teaching

The number and types of students that special education teachers serve, their job responsibilities, and the extent to which their schools are caring and supportive of students and staff (subsequently referred to as *school climate*), can affect teachers' confidence and intent to stay in the profession.

Teachers must be prepared for diverse students. Eighty percent of special education teachers serve students with two or more primary disabilities, and 32 percent teach students with four or more different primary disabilities. On average, almost one-fourth of their students are from a cultural or linguistic group different from their own, and 7 percent are English language learners. Special education teachers serve students who are highly diverse and challenging even though they typically serve fewer

Number of different disabilities represented on special education teachers' caseloads



[1] Complete citations are listed on www.spense.org.

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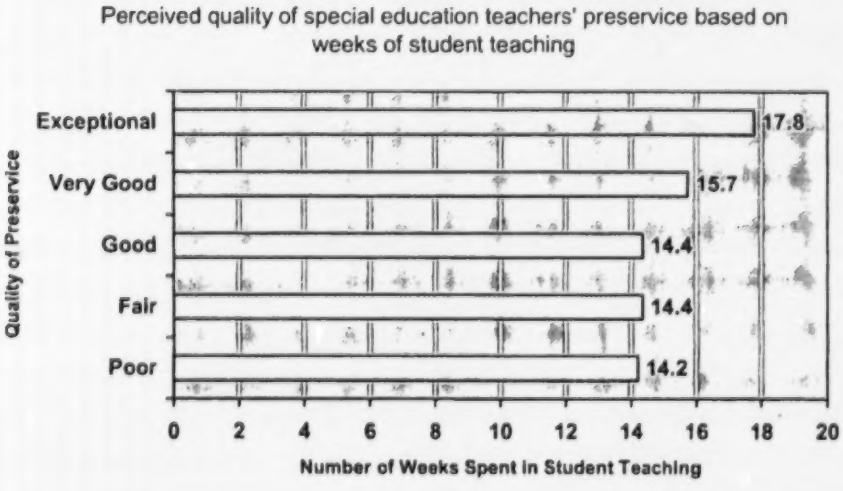
students (13 in PK-6th grade and 25 in 7th-12th) than general educators (24 in PK-6th grade and 118 in 7th-12th). Today's special education teachers must be innovative, adaptive, and prepared to use an array of instructional approaches that suit students with a wide variety of needs.

Teachers must allocate time for noninstructional tasks. Special and general education teachers work long hours during the school year. The typical special education teacher works 53 hours per week, and the typical general educator works 55 hours per week. Special and general education teachers spend the majority of that time (25 and 27 hours per week, respectively) in direct instruction with students. What are the other time-consuming tasks? Special and general education teachers average 5 hours a week preparing for lessons, and special educators spend another 5 hours completing administrative forms and paperwork. General educators spend fewer hours on forms and paperwork (2 hours) but more time grading tests and homework (4 hours). Both special and general education teachers devote few hours to communicating with parents (1 hour), sharing expertise with colleagues (1 hour), or counseling students (0.5 hours).

School climate may affect workload manageability. Most general and special education teachers find their workload manageable. However, special education teachers tend to find their workload less manageable than their general education counterparts. Manageability of workload is an important factor associated with a teacher's intent to stay in the profession. Interestingly, school climate, that is, the extent to which schools are caring and supportive of students and staff, is related to special education teachers' workload manageability and intent to stay. It appears that the negative effects of a burdensome workload may be offset by supportive administrators and colleagues—a key feature in schools with a positive climate.

Acquiring the Tools for Teaching



Preservice preparation and continuing professional development are designed to help teachers acquire the knowledge and skills they need. Does the extent and quality of teachers' preservice education and continuing professional development affect perceived success? Absolutely.

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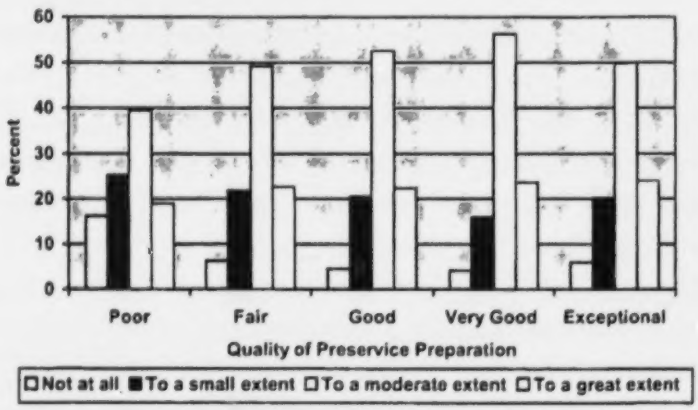
Preservice preparation matters. Special education teachers who rated their preservice preparation as very good or exceptional considered themselves more successful than others in providing services to students with disabilities and said their workload was more manageable. Plus, special education teachers who attended colleges or universities with stringent admissions requirements were far more likely than those attending less competitive institutions to pass tests required for teaching certification or licensure on the first try.

Why were some preservice programs rated higher than others? Special education teachers who judged the quality of their preservice preparation as very good or exceptional completed more weeks of student teaching than their peers. The type of school in which student teaching and other field experiences occurred was also important. For example, special education teachers who interacted with culturally and linguistically diverse students during their field experiences reported being more skilled in later meeting similar students' educational needs. Many recently prepared special education teachers said their preservice programs did not address specific knowledge and skills important to teaching such as supervising paraprofessionals (77 percent), accommodating culturally and linguistically diverse students' needs (51 percent), using professional literature to address issues encountered in teaching (49 percent), and collaborating with general education teachers (47 percent). Not surprisingly, these were some of the areas in which special education teachers reported feeling least skillful.

Because 75 percent of students with disabilities spend much of their day in regular classes, general education teachers must be prepared to teach them. Yet just over half of general educators who had been teaching 6 years or fewer received any preservice preparation in adapting instruction for students with disabilities, and only two-thirds were taught how to manage student behavior.

Continuing professional development enhances confidence in skills. Overall, special and general educators devoted considerable time to continuing professional development, averaging 59 and 65 hours, respectively, in 1999-2000. Special education teachers rated the quality of district-supported professional development moderately well. However, it did not reliably incorporate best practices in staff development, such as actively engaging teachers in the learning process or allowing time for planning how to implement newly acquired skills. For beginning special education teachers, meetings with other new teachers and informal help from colleagues were more

Extent to which special education teachers feel workload is manageable based on perceived quality of preservice



beneficial than district-supported staff development programs. Interestingly, general education teachers found formal mentoring programs more helpful than special educators did, perhaps because special education teachers were less likely to have a mentor in their building whose teaching assignments were similar to their own.

General education teachers typically found district-supported professional development activities moderately helpful and, in some cases, acquired skills through those programs that were beneficial in serving students with disabilities. Twenty-one percent received more than 8 hours of continuing professional development in the past 3 years on adapting instruction for students with disabilities, 49 percent received less than 8 hours, and 31 percent did not receive any professional development in that area. In managing behavior, 28 percent received more than 8 hours of inservice, 46 percent received less than 8 hours, and 26 percent received no inservice instruction in behavior management.

Working Toward the Future

SPeNSE provides additional evidence that, overall, today's teachers are well-prepared and highly experienced. Yet teacher shortages may threaten our ability to assign high-quality teachers to every classroom. In 1999-2000, 12,241 positions for special education teachers were left vacant or filled by substitutes because suitable candidates could not be found. Of those special education teachers employed, 8 percent were not fully certified for their positions.

Retention is an important component in ensuring high-quality teaching, and working conditions are important to retention. SPeNSE showed that steps can be taken to help teachers better manage their workloads. Teachers who received quality preservice preparation felt better prepared to handle diverse student learning needs and other job requirements. Continuing professional development that was intensive and tailored to their needs enabled educators to develop new skills and competencies and improve those previously attained.

Please share these findings with your colleagues, administrators, and union representatives and use them as a starting point for discussions about ways to improve the school climate, classroom instruction, and student achievement.

The Study of Personnel Needs in Special Education (SPeNSE), funded by OSEP and conducted by Westat, included telephone interviews with a nationally representative sample of local administrators, special and general education teachers, speech-language pathologists, and paraprofessionals in spring and fall 2000. For more information and a complete list of references, go to www.spense.org.

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